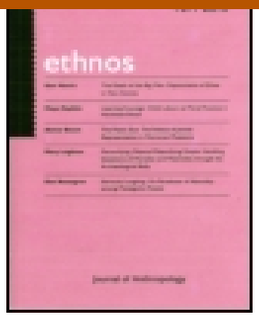

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Patrick O'Hare

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Creating Waste and Resisting Recovery: Contested Practices and Metaphors in Post-neoliberal Argentina

Patrick O'Hare

University of St Andrews, UK

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a 'register of recovery' that emerged in post-crisis and post-neoliberal Argentina as a way of imagining and framing an increasingly disparate collection of persons, things, and ideas, from young workers, to green space, to hose pipes. Drawing on ethnography conducted at the NuevaMente recycling cooperative in Morón, Greater Buenos Aires, the article attends to the material implications stemming from the adoption of the rather hopeful concept of recovery, and the counter-models proposed by young workers, who view the workplace as a space not of cathartic recovery, but of temporary care and respite from the complications of family life. By emphasising the recovery of workers into the formal economy, their rich labour histories are deliberately unknown, while a focus on the recoverability of things ignores not only their lack of value, but also their potential hazardousness.

KEYWORDS Recovery; waste; cooperatives; unknowing; Argentina

Introduction

Under the ramshackle, leaky roof of the *NuevaMente*[1] recycling cooperative in Morón, Greater Buenos Aires, bags of plastics, paper, cardboard, and metal are sorted and classified by local workers of all ages, watched over by supervisors from the municipal government and the environmental NGO *Abuela Naturaleza* (Grandmother Nature). The premise of the joint venture between NGO, local government, and cooperative is that alongside materials, workers coming from situations of unemployment or substance abuse are being recovered and recycled too.

The idea of recovering and recycling people alongside waste material has spread in Latin America in tandem with the expansion of recycling cooperatives, a model adopted by waste-picker organisations[2] and local governments.[3] Such a phenomenon is not limited to the American continent, as Alexander's work on re-use organisations in

CONTACT Patrick O'Hare patrick.a.ohare@gmail.com

England well demonstrates (2009). Alexander and Reno (2012: 26) note that there are often religious imaginaries of salvage and salvation at play here, a redemptive politics through which dignity and citizenship are purportedly restored to the marginalised. In the case described in this this article, municipal government and NGO alike ascribed wastefulness to the neoliberal regime of Carlos Menem – Argentine President between 1989 and 1999 – and its local allies in Morón, setting the stage for a redemptive politics of recovery.

What does it mean politically (and otherwise) to represent matter using a soteriological discourse or a cyclical imaginary? What are the effects of depicting people as waste and what spaces for political and economic intervention does this open up? What is the best way to understand claims that both persons and things are being recovered and recycled? Arguably, academic engagement with tropes of recovery and recycling in Latin America has been mostly celebratory (see Gutberlet 2008, 2016). Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Buenos Aires in 2013, this article adopts a more critical bent, exploring how the concept of recovery is employed as a metaphor with material implications and limits, causing persons and things to 'bite back' (Tenner 1996) against the classificatory framework in which they are placed. The central argument is that post-neoliberal discourse at most levels in the Argentine fieldsite – except that of grassroots workers – classified a range of neoliberal policies as wasteful and generative of waste, thereby providing the requisite baseline against which the present and future could be seen as characterised by multi-fold practices of recovery. The overwhelming emphasis on the wastefulness of the past and the recoverability of persons and things in the present and future is shown to rub against the materiality of things and how young people recognise or know themselves.

This article is structured into four sections that constitute a movement from the national, to the municipal, to the individual persons and things that enter the Nueva-Mente recycling cooperative. The first section considers how a discourse of post-neoliberal recovery emerged in contrast to a neoliberal crisis, where people, resources, and the environment were portrayed by insurgent political forces as having been wasted by macro-economic policies and corruption. It then narrows down to the local vernacular in Morón, where a 'register of recovery' was adopted as an language that engulfed an increasing range of persons and things. I trace how wastes are first invoked – thus obfuscating other ways of knowing people and things – and then are 'unmade' through discursive and material regimes of salvage. Through ethnography, the precise techniques by which wastes are known and unknown, represented and disappeared, and the courses of action that are thereby curtailed or opened up, are explored (see introduction to special issue).

The next section assesses how far workers conform to or resist a narrative that positions them as recovering from social ills and then being reincorporated into the productive economy. In the final section on metaphors of waste and the materiality of recovery, I argue that what occurs in the cooperative can be understood as a case of synecdoche, where a structural, process-based metaphor is drawn from part of the workforce and waste-stream and applied to their wholes. Taken together, the article attempts to recover the possibility that doing justice to our interlocutors' accounts

does not necessarily mean refusing to accept that they might be talking metaphorically, as has been suggested elsewhere (e.g. Henare et al 2006: 1; Ingold 2000: 44). Rather, in tracing the ways that informants alternated between talking metaphorically and literally about the transformations that people and things either underwent or were expected to undergo, tropes of waste and recovery are shown to be useful avenues through which to critically assess the rhetorical and material struggles between neoliberalism and post-neoliberal pretenders at national and municipal political levels.

Crisis and Recovery in Argentina and Morón

Morón is a town and municipal ward in Greater Buenos Aires with a population of nearly 100,000, known as the 'capital of the west' due to its large commercial, financial, and political centre. Fieldwork was largely carried out in August 2013, supplemented by several return visits. Participant observation was conducted alongside people at the NuevaMente conveyer belt but also in waste collections and electronics disassembly, and I socialised with colleagues at after-work gatherings and social occasions like local football matches. I also interviewed NuevaMente workers, municipal waste managers, and NGO officials overseeing the cooperative's work. In theory, the cooperative was only meant to receive recyclable waste from Morón's local government, brought either by a private waste management company that held the municipal concession, or by the cooperative's small pick-up truck. Materials were then classified into different categories, baled, and sold on to industry, with residual waste taken to the landfill by municipal trucks. The cooperative did not transform recyclables (e.g. by washing plastics or turning PET bottles into flakes) but did add value to them through processes of classification and baling.

How did an imagined shared potential for 'recovery' bring such a collection of things and persons together under one roof? As has been explored elsewhere (e.g. Whitson 2011; Sorroche 2018), the *cartonero* recycling cooperatives of (Greater) Buenos Aires are of varying sizes and organisational models, with the term *cartonero* ('cardboarder') used to describe the many people who work collecting, classifying, and selling recyclable waste, often informally. Many turned to the activity following the Argentine economic crisis of 2001 (Grimson 2008; Carenzo & Miguéz 2010). Set up and guided by the NGO Abuela Naturaleza and supported financially by the Municipality of Morón, NuevaMente has always been more of a mixed enterprise than the autonomous response of workers to crisis. Only some workers had previously collected recyclables on the street and few identified as *cartoneros*. Instead, the salience of NuevaMente lies in its composite model involving NGO, local state and cooperative, the most pronounced and integrated arrangement of its kind in Greater Buenos Aires (Sorroche 2018).

The Argentine economic crisis of 2001 and its closely interlinked political crisis – known locally simply as *la crisis* – was widely seen as the result of a decade of President Carlos Menem's neoliberal policies (Munck 2005). The question of waste was tied to neoliberalism's crisis in myriad ways, beyond the inability to deal with growing quantities of rubbish (Sorroche 2016: 142). First, as expressed by a municipal supervisor at NuevaMente, neoliberal policies of deindustrialisation, privatisation and correlated

high unemployment were represented as wasteful of national productive capacity, in terms of both labour and industrial output. Second, the workers made 'redundant' during the neoliberal period and crisis were not only treated 'like garbage' but had to turn to waste-picking to make a living. The neoliberal period thus came to be associated with a wasteful approach to resources and the conceptualisation of certain people and discards as waste. Such accusations of human wastage echo those levelled by Polanyi at the 'great transformation' of European society in the nineteenth century, where 'unfettered market exchange … produces material gain for the few but wastes human potential at both the level of individuals and the nation' (Alexander 2009: 223).

Following the crisis of neoliberalism in Argentina, the ideas of recovery and recuperation suggested by the Spanish *recuperación* proliferated at the political, economic and environmental levels during the decade-long governments of first Néstor, and then his wife Cristina Kirchner. Workers recovered factories and workplaces (Faulk 2012, Vieta 2013); recyclables were recovered from the trash by urban *recuperadores [recoverers]* (Paiva 2009); children of those 'disappeared' during the dictatorship recovered their identities (Gatti 2012); jobs were recovered, and with them, values and dignity (Zuazúa 2006); politicians, engaging in a politics which had supposedly recovered its integrity, claimed to be recovering for the people that of which they were wrongly dispossessed (Shever 2012).

In order to explore the different meanings of recovery in these diverse applications, it is useful to separate the concept's medical and legal etymologies. The medical definition involves a return to a previous state of good health, 'the restoration of a person (or more rarely, a thing) to a healthy or normal condition, or to consciousness'.[4] It is this medical sense that 'economic recovery' draws upon, since the expression technically denotes a return to the (healthy) growth rates enjoyed before an economic crisis. The second legal sense, meanwhile, denotes 'the … restoration to one's control or possession of a thing lost, stolen, or otherwise taken away, retrieval; the possibility of recovering such a thing'.[5] The employment of 'recovery' in the Argentinian political realm uses this second definition, proclaiming a 'taking back' of that which was stolen from the country's working classes during years of neoliberalism. For example, at the presentation of a draft recycling law that I attended, the deputy Karina Nazábal, speaking to a crowd of *recuperadores urbanos* from the MTE movement, outlined how she and her husband, the local mayor, were in politics to 'recover what belongs to the people'. Workers of the recovered factories movement also appealed to an imaginary of taking back what was rightfully theirs (Fernández 2006). The phrase 'worker-recovered company' gained momentum in Argentina, with workers who occupied their cooperatives prior to 2001 even 'reinterpreting their historical memory' by describing them post-hoc as recoveries (Palomino *et al.* 2010: 257; see Lazar 2014, for a discussion of workers recovering their trade unions).

This broader national economic and political climate was propitious for the creation of Morón's recycling cooperative, where the municipality's recent political history led the register of recovery to take on a particular vernacular framing. During the 1990s, the municipality exemplified the corruption endemic in Argentine politics (Aureano & Ducatenzeiler 2002: 69). Its Mayor, Juan Carlos Rousselot, became embroiled in a

series of scandals, from spending well beyond his mayoral salary, to accusations of corruption in the award of public waste contracts, to the building of a majestic mayoral residence. He was twice forced to resign before finally being arrested and charged (Gattoni 2010). In 1999 Martín Sabbatella was elected as the youngest-ever mayor of a Buenos Aires municipality on a platform of anti-corruption and transparency. High public approval ratings and high-profile actions, such as inviting Transparency International to audit the awarding of public contracts, transformed Sabbatella into a rising star of Argentine politics and Morón into a model of a new way of doing politics. Although not Peronist, Sabbatella's Nuevo Encuentro party eventually allied itself with Argentine President Cristina Kirchner and her ruling *Frente para la Victoria* coalition (2007–2015). A transformed Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) policy symbolised the new administration's approach: Sabbatella cancelled the previous waste contract, reportedly saving the municipality some US$6 million annually (Moffett 2004). The nature of Argentine politics meant that the waste managers cited in this article were political appointees, allied with Sabbatella and sympathetic to Cristina's national government.

The origin of NuevaMente lies partly with Sabbatella and partly with the Abuela Naturaleza NGO and its President, Clara, whose environmental concerns date back to 1985, when she moved to the countryside with her husband and four children. There, she told me, she 'discovered' waste, given that they had no waste collection services at all. Previously, she said, she hadn't been an activist or a *militante*. Now environmentalism became her 'mission in life'. In 1998, her brother introduced her to a group of waste-pickers in neighbouring La Matanza and she helped to found and was president of an early cartonero cooperative, *Renacer* (Rebirth) – note the allusion to human circularity. She then decided to move in the direction of environmental education, with the materials themselves – represented as puppets with their own personalities – telling stories from their point of view. They especially didn't want to be taken to landfill.

Recently a grandmother, Clara called herself Abuela Naturaleza (Grandmother Nature) when she contacted the local government, who began to pay her for the performances. She was also now separating waste at home, and between the household classification and educational puppetry, a group of people formed around her: in 2006 she invited them to formalise as a non-profit *Asociación Civil*. 'Grandmother Nature' could now enter a municipal waste separation scheme into Moron's first participatory budgets, an example of Sabbatella's 'new way of doing politics'. Following preliminary studies and the approval of the Mayor and his team, Morón Recicla and the NuevaMente cooperative were launched in 2009.

Funding to establish Morón's waste management unit, expand the *NuevaMente* cooperative's remit, and plan a new model recycling cooperative[6] also came from a body, ACUMAR,[7] set up to counteract environmental damage caused by industrial dumping and contamination of the Matanza and Riachuelo waterways before and during the neoliberal period. ACUMAR's mission was to 'recover' the banks of the Matanza and Riachuelo through the financing of public works, thereby improving the quality of life of current and future generations of residents.[8] Morón, as one of the municipalities affected, was able to bid for national and local funds in order to establish an integrated waste management system known as GIRSU.[9] With increased funding

from ACUMAR, the municipality's Día Verde (Green Day) scheme was launched in April 2013, signifying a significant expansion of Móron Recicla to include the entire municipality, with the local government now principally in charge of collection.

Funding programmes of environmental recovery thus became a way of counteracting the corrupt award of waste management contracts during the neoliberal era, and a means through which Morón's new administration could contrast itself to the *ancien régime*. The idea of recovery was also used as a way of conceptualising the 'taking back' of wasted spaces. 'Where there's a fly-tipping site, let's turn it into a plaza that our citizens can enjoy, consider their own and conserve', Gustavo Escudero, GIRSU director, told me, mentioning Morón's new ecological reserve, landscaped out of a former illegal dumping ground. The site of the *NuevaMente* recycling cooperative was also recovered by the local state. Previously one of the largest ceramics cooperatives in Latin America, it had closed during the neoliberal period of deindustrialisation, and rusted into a dilapidated industrial ruin until it was rented by the municipality. Such transformation of discarded urban spaces highlights another definition of recovery as 'the reclamation of wasteland … for cultivation or construction'.[10]

Neoliberal wastage, in the sense of 'improper use' (Scanlan 2005: 22) of resources, was thus transformed into post-neoliberal recovery (Sader 2009; Peck *et al.* 2010) at various levels. Large parts of Latin America could in the 2000s be described as post-neoliberal in that several governments (Evo in Bolivia, Lula in Brazil, Chávez in Venezuela etc.) were elected that positioned themselves against neoliberalism. The 2001 economic crash in Argentina has been called neoliberalism's 'Berlin Wall moment' (Munck 2005), the economic failure of a country that was supposed to have done everything right and whose President was paraded by the IMF and World Bank as a poster boy for their policies (Carranza 2005). Neoliberalism was widely discredited as a political project, with many countries defaulting on IMF loans and national (e.g. BNDES in Brazil) and regional financial infrastructures created or strengthened to support lending and development on more favourable terms. *Neoliberal* became a dirty word used to discredit opponents on the right and explicit opposition to neoliberalism united numerous disparate forces on the left and centre, at various levels.

There is a deeper debate about how far policies implemented by the centre-left governments actually broke with neoliberalism or only modified it. Grugel and Rigorozzi argue that post-neoliberalism in Latin America should be understood as anchored by an increased and dynamic role of the state in the economy, a renewed link between state and society, and increased social spending (2012: 71–72). Auyero and de Lara (2012) are more dismissive of the prospects of post-neoliberal social inclusion, when this meant little more than the widespread adoption of Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) already implemented by centrist and right-wing governments in the 1990s. Gago and Sztulwark (2009) undertake one of the most sophisticated analyses of the possibilities and prospects for post-neoliberalism in Argentina, describing Cristina's (2007–2015) government as linking 'a new social and political pact vis-a-vis the bicentenary of the nation state', with a continued focus on export-led neo-developmentalism, continental integration, and human rights (2009: 184).

Here, my concern is not to assess the radicalism of Argentina's post-neoliberal policies but rather to tell the story of how, at a municipal level, the contours of the new post-neoliberal were inextricably tied to a representation of the old neoliberal system as actively wasteful (see Valderrama Peña's article is this special issue). Even trust in local politics was represented as having been wasted. Gustavo told me that, 'in the neoliberal period of Argentina … politics was completely distorted. Now, political activists feel good because politics … is recovering its role as generator of change … now we've *recovered* politics as a transformative tool … ' (my *ital*). Marina Parra, Director of the municipality's Environmental Policy unit, also spoke of Sabbatella's arrival in power as initiating a 'set of policies based around human rights and transparency, honesty and efficiency in public spending, citizen participation and the *recovery* of municipal institutions which until that moment had been profoundly corrupt' (my *ital*). Parra expanded the idea of recovery from the transformation of the local state, linking it to the recovery of Peronist[11] social security and dignity:

> It seems to me that the idea of recovery isn't only about putting together a *cartonero* cooperative. Recovering … is recovering in the broadest sense. It is also recovering when there are situations of domestic violence, it's asking what one wants to do, it's inviting [people] to form part of a collective. Recovering means recovering human dignity.

Marina's use of the term draws metaphorically on the medical sense of 'restoration to a prior state of health', yet thinking about things and persons as recoverable also led to the construction of a material infrastructure of recycling. In sum, from landfill disposal, incineration and shady private contracts, public transparency and a recovery model took centre stage in Morón. The next section looks at what happens when metaphorical and polysemous expressions of recovery take on a gritty material form at the *NuevaMente* cooperative, where discarded things and precarious subjectivities were brought together under one roof.

Recovering Things at NuevaMente

Inside the dilapidated building that served as canteen, office, and meeting room for *NuevaMente*, Lourdes classified bottle caps steadily. With a knife, she skilfully and speedily removed the transparent blue plastic from the inside and separated natural from synthetic corks and metal caps from plastic, throwing each into separate chutes that rolled into bags below. She had been moved inside to this task so that she might care for her son whilst working; the infant slept peacefully on a mat on the floor. Antonio, Lourdes's partner and the father of her child, also worked in the cooperative and was out 'on call', responding to enquiries for the collection of recyclables.

Every material that arrived at the Morón cooperative should, in theory, have been not just recoverable, but specifically recyclable, forming part of the stock of materials – plastics, metals, papers, glass – that can be broken down and put through industrial processes to form new products. Unrecyclable waste should have been collected by a private concessionary and taken to a municipal landfill. Yet because of the inexperience of both *vecinos* (residents) and municipal garbage workers, around half of the waste that the cooperative received was made up of organic matter, for which there was no

composting scheme in place. So whilst this material was recoverable, the appropriate technological infrastructure was not in place to enable this to happen. A municipal emphasis on recovery thus came up against a first material difficulty, and workers divided *material*, meaning that which was recoverable, from *basura* (rubbish), which was not. Making this division, and differentiating between different categories of *material*, was described by Simón, the President of the Cooperative, as a matter of 'knowing the *material*':

> What happens … is that a thing comes with a range of metals. You have to separate the aluminium, the bronze, the copper, the stainless steel. Everything has its secret. You need to know all the metals. You don't just chuck the metal here, there, everywhere. No, no, no. You need to know it.

Different senses were used to 'know the material'. As I experienced at the conveyer belt, one often had to handle cardboard to discover whether it was thick enough to be placed with *cartón* or was thinner and thus grouped with *segunda* (second grade paper). One day, experienced *cartonero* Jorge and I went through a large bag that contained different types of plastic, looking principally for materials known as *bazaar*.[12] I found it very difficult to tell this apart from another plastic called 'high impact'[13] and Jorge tried to explain how bazaar would stretch when bent whereas 'high impact' was more likely to break. When he was unsure, Jorge might hurl the material to the ground, using the sound it made on impact as a further means of classification. The appeal to multiple senses (especially smell) in the process of classification appears in Butt's contribution to this special issue, and in Carenzo's (2013) ethnography of another Buenos Aires recycling cooperative, where an informant spoke of differentiating plastics according to the smells that they gave off when burned: sweet, bittersweet, of candles (2013: 9). These embodied forms of knowing broke down the institutional attempt to temporally displace waste and wasteful activity back into the period of neoliberal governance. Not only did municipal infrastructure continue to 'waste' organic material instead of recovering it, workers also complained that their time was wasted transferring organic waste from one bag to another, instead of allowing it to flow directly to the landfill.

Material was primarily recovered to be sold on as commodities, and income from the sale formed much of the weekly income of the cooperativists; the rest consisted of an 'incentive' from the municipality. The zeal with which things were recovered was not a purely a matter of maximising income, however. *NuevaMente* recovered over ten different materials, each divided into several sub-categories and the effort to recover the maximum possible range meant spending time collecting things that had low or sometimes no immediate market value. This was in contrast to other *cartoneros* working in the informal sector who would often only concentrate on a few profitable materials. The impetus for extensive recovery came from the environmental NGO and the municipality, and resulted in an uncommon richness and detail in the processes of classification and collection. Materials that didn't currently have a market or buyer locally, such as 'hose-pipe' and polystyrene, were still amassed at the site in the hope of finding a future market and a technology capable of adequately treating them, a

form of temporal displacement that downplays current waste status to focus on potential recovery in the future.

In such circumstances, waste material resisted inscription into an imaginary where everything was recoverable and could be reincorporated into productive processes. A relevant precursor here is what Gille terms 'metallic socialism' in the Soviet Union when, during the 1950s, the Soviet government mobilised the population to recover scrap metals through slogans such as 'new bridges, factories, apartment buildings and tractors are made from metal scrap: let's fulfil the waste quotas!' (2007: 46). This fitted within the overall socialist model that 'saw waste as a benevolent *deus ex machina*, "a gift of nature" to be used in fulfilling quotas in their efforts to establish communism' (Gille 2007: 22). Gille's argument is that the Hungarian authorities identified *all* waste with the material characteristics and recoverability of scrap metal. The emphasis was on stockpiling waste as if it were containable like metal and as if easy uses for it might be found, a model that proved problematic for the chemical industry, where chemical waste in 'drums, being piled up on the factory yard, started corroding and leaking' (2007: 99). We might call this the waste politics of synecdoche, where the part is taken to represent the whole: solid state, tangible and discrete metallic scrap come to stand for waste as a whole, with the evident problems this entails as chemical waste 'bites back' (2007: 58), corroding the containers that it is stored in and causing a public health hazard.

The idea of 'waste regime' is useful for thinking through waste at *NuevaMente*. The emphasis on recovering waste into productive processes led to the stockpiling of *de facto* unrecyclable waste materials at the cooperative. The present unrecyclable nature of the materials in the local economy was downplayed by a focus on a past that had to be avoided, and an optimistic orientation towards the future, when a market and technology could be found. A lack of use or exchange value are not sufficient conditions for a material to be considered as waste. Instead, the discursive, political regimes in which materials are embedded influence how they are regarded, managed, and stored. The hopefulness of the recovery model was nevertheless dampened by the tons of organic waste that continued to arrive at the cooperative, as classifying *vecinos* failed to understand the limits of recovery in Morón, which lacked a composting or anaerobic digestion scheme. One particular image stands out as a challenge to the micro-utopia of ubiquitous recoverability: a photograph I was shown of cooperative worker María holding up a dead dog that she had encountered at the conveyer belt. Whether old hose pipe, dead animals or low-grade plastics lacking a local commodity market, some waste materials resisted inscription into a model based on productive recovery of their potential. Although they could be conjured away discursively by temporal rhetoric, their sticky, viscous, and even morbid materiality were all too present in hands and lives of recycling workers.

Recovery and Reinsertion of Labour

Like materials, the workers who entered the recycling cooperative were also imagined as capable of recovery, with the meaning of recovery more closely tied to the medical sense

of being 'restored to a prior state of health'. No-one in my field site acted as though helping a *compañero* recover from drug addiction was the *same* as recovering a piece of hose-pipe from the trash. As Danny Miller (2005) argues, while some anthropologists might have intellectually dismissed an ontological divide between the subject and object, they still need to 'listen to, and take seriously informants who might find such a binary useful' (2005: 10). I retain a 'minimal humanism' (Thrift 2008: 13) then, but draw attention to a common process of emic theorisation, where both people and things are brought together in a single 'register of recovery'. One of the NGO workers, Pablo, for example, initially entered the cooperative to deal with e-waste. Yet he told me that he soon realised the cooperative 'was a place where not only materials but also persons were recovered as well'. Although he continued working on the recovery of electronics and LED lights, his role was soon expanded to include mentoring and training the young workers.

NuevaMente was founded with the dual purpose of being both a viable economic enterprise treating Morón's recyclable waste, and an opportunity for *cartoneros* and young people with social problems to gain meaningful employment. Workers had to have been employed at NuevaMente for around six months before they could become full cooperative members, which meant contributing $25 pesos per week and gave them the right to vote in assemblies. Abuela Naturaleza also ran literacy and computer skills workshops for the workers and a club for their children and siblings. There was no requirement that someone working at the plant need have significant current or previous problems but as Pilar put it, 'most people here have suffered a lot, you start talking to one person, then another and you realise that they're here because they're really in need'. Gustavo agreed that what united the group was that everyone had a 'lack'.

If neoliberalism is partly characterised by the flexibility of the workforce to work long hours for little pay and without job security (Tickell & Peck 1995) then another term is needed for a post-neoliberal regime where the prerogative to be supple falls not on the worker alone but also on the enterprise. The term 'elastic' was employed by municipal waste manager Gustavo:

> We're very elastic with the working hours. Whoever wants to get down from the belt to smoke a cigarette does so … and the 40 minute lunch break is a lot more than 40 minutes! … They take this as the … elasticity of working hours, the elasticity of discipline.

Although there were supposedly two shifts (8am-4pm and 1pm-7pm), many workers had working hours tailored to their personal circumstances. Hernán, for example, worked 10am-4pm. Lourdes started at 9am because she needed to drop her two little girls off at school. Pilar arrived at around 1:30pm, because she worked at the large state cooperative work scheme Argentina Trabaja (Argentina Works) in the morning, then dropped off her kids in the afternoon. Workers, especially recent recruits who were not yet cooperative members, were keen to test the limits of elasticity. Joshua and Leo, observing the different working hours of others, asked whether they could just come in to work whenever they felt like it. They soon started to rack up a few absences. Another example of elasticity was the case of working mothers, with the cooperative

making certain accommodations and attempts to understand the difficulties of funding childcare on low wages. Thus, it was not unusual to find a particularly vivid manifestation of the coming together of the social and the economic: Clara working in the administrative space while a baby slept on a mattress on the floor. The day I interviewed Silvana, we were graced with the presence of Joaquin, who chattered his way through my interview, buzzing about in a car which had been rescued from the rubbish by Antonio, shouting 'Phones, phones, I'm selling phones!'. A managerial desk doubled up as a space for Joaquín to have his dinner.

In this context, two meanings of recovery into a prior state of health could be discerned in the discourse of NGO and municipal managers: the first was when workers were physically recovering from substance abuse and homelessness, the second is more complex, when they were imagined as reverting back to the idealised figure of the Peronist worker. I consider these different manifestations of recovery in succession. The colourfully-tattooed Óscar worked with Pedro recovering precious metals from computer mother-boards. As we disassembled the machines one day, conversation turned to football. As well as supporting the local team, did he also play? I asked. Smiling, he told me that he had already retired. 'At 21?', I responded, 'a bit young, no?' He had enjoyed a few years of 'sabbatical', he replied laughing, 'on the *pasta base* [crack]'. This hadn't done wonders for his health, he explained, but now he was clean, holding down this job, and soon to become a father. Another worker, Linda, had previously suffered from drug and alcohol addiction but working at the cooperative had helped her to get this under control. Being given responsibility for the organisation of work had given her the self-confidence to quit, she told me. Interestingly, however, an NGO worker suggested that her addictive personality had not disappeared completely but had rather been transformed into an 'obsessive' recovery of things from the conveyer belt. Indeed, when a few colleagues and I visited her home for after-work drinks, she proudly showed off a diverse range of ornaments, bric-a-brac, furniture, and white goods she had acquired in this way. Workers were allowed to take things home, but the accusation that Linda was unable to take things in a controlled way effectively pushed the NGO's ethos of recycling and re-use to its reasonable limits.

Linda's case is instructive for exploring the relationship between persons and things entangled in the register of recovery. Linda managed a temporary recovery from serious substance abuse through being given a position of responsibility in the cooperative. After a life that also involved serious violence, she achieved a sort of redemption through the daily performance of what in the NGO's environmental imaginary was a clearly ethical act: the recovery of things diverted from landfill to be recycled. Yet this very process (recovery) had become problematic for the NGO, highlighting the ambiguous relation to things in the environmental imaginary. These should neither be wasted nor hoarded, the latter apparently indicating a pathological dependence. Instead, they should be put into proper, productive use, recalling John Locke (1993 [c.1681])'s emphasis on productivity and industriousness as integral to property rights (in Scanlan 2005: 276–277).

Work was conceptualised as a mode of recovery for more than those suffering from addiction. Antonio and César, young co-workers and friends who often played at the

loveable rogues in the cooperative, had previously lived on the streets. Antonio had been in and out of child services, had run away, and then ended up homeless. He proudly told me that he had been accepted to work permanently in the cooperative after only a short trial, and was joined by his partner Lourdes, who had recently given birth to the couple's first child. César, nicknamed Maradona for his resemblance to the Argentine football legend, also used his earnings to support a young family. Gustavo received referrals for these young people from his wife, who worked for the council's social services department. He highlighted the important association between labour and recovery in Morón by arguing that vulnerable young people in contact with social services were not truly recovered until they had been employed, arguing that, 'if you recover someone from homelessness but don't have a job to give them then there's no recovery at all, it's all a lie'.

There is an interesting parallel here with the NGO's critique of Linda's hoarding of things, as if both persons and things both needed to be put to a productive use, rather than simply being taken from one context and placed in another. Applied to human beings, this discourse focused on creating new (cooperative) subjects through labour, and the use of analogy with processes of material transformation, have clear resonances with the idea of the socialist new man. Turning again to Gille (2007), she quotes lines from the Soviet-era Czech film *Larks on a String*, in which the head of a scrap processing cooperative boasts, in a variant of the familiar Soviet 'new man' trope: 'we'll make tractors from this steel to plough our fields and more washers so you can wash your overalls. These are our volunteer workers, mostly of bourgeois origin. We'll also smelt them down into a new kind of people' (quoted in Gille 2007: 40).

In the Argentine case, the human material targeted for transformation was more lumpen proletariat than bourgeoisie: *cartoneros* and vulnerable young people sought out for recruitment and recovery. The recent influx of workers into *NuevaMente* had been young people like César and Antonio, who called themselves '*los pibes*'.[14] An important idea that I identified in the discourse of NGO and municipal officials in relation to them was that they lacked *la cultura de trabajo* ('work culture'). This arose generally not as an accusation that *los pibes* were lazy, did not want to work, or held the blame for not knowing how to. Instead, officials linked their supposed condition to structural factors. The narrative that I heard almost identically from different informants in management was that young workers often came from families where neither father nor grandfather worked because they had been fired and had not subsequently found other employment in a lacklustre Argentine economy. Such subjects are understood thus as both product and waste of years of neoliberal governance, lumpen proletariat in Marx's sense of the system's waste (c.f. Thoburn 2002), their subjectivities produced out of structural factors, their labour effectively wasted by a capitalism that tolerated high unemployment in the pursuit of higher profits. Pedro, who otherwise resisted ascribing a lack of 'work culture' to a whole generation, made a revealing comparison between his own upbringing and that of young people in Argentina today. While he was growing up, he told me, his father – an inventor and metalworker at a nearby factory – was his hero. Nowadays, faced with computer-illiterate

and potentially-unemployed parents, he asserted, young people turned to film: the home-grown worker-hero was replaced by the global superhero.

The worker-hero is a figure integral to the Peronist imaginary. Perón exalted the figure of the (formal-sector) worker, endowing him with rights and citizenship.[15] Rather than pursue industrialisation by exploiting the working class, he sought to rally them to his cause by giving them, through their trade union representatives, privileged access to government (James 1988). Election campaign rhetoric – Perón proclaimed that 'Argentina must recover the firm pulse of a healthy and clean-living youth, Argentina needs the young blood of the working class' (ibid: 21) – was followed by substantive social reform. After Perón's exile in 1955 there was in the working class, a 'structure of feeling' of nostalgia for the Peronist era that combined 'regressive fantasy for "the good old days" of a "golden era"' with selective appropriation of the past as a 'basis for a claim for a future society based on social justice and non-exploitation' (ibid: 98). When Perón finally returned briefly, in 1973, this was heralded by workers as the – tragically short-lived – restoration of dignity after years of repression and humiliation:

> Peron's return was the return of decency and dignity for us workers, to get the *patrón* off our backs, it was the return of happiness, it was the end of all the sadness and bitterness that had weighed upon millions of regular men (Seveso 2010: 239)

Peronism as a political movement has its own cyclical imaginary then, characterised by periodic assertions of a return to an idealised period of Peron's first (1945–1955) spell in government. In the NuevaMente recycling cooperative, one key difference was that that it was not Perón himself who was supposed to return but the productive working class whose rights he had promoted. Cooperative managers effectively sought to reconstruct the strong, muscular, and productive working class out of what they posited as the fragments left behind by a decade of neoliberalism. It was often assumed, for example, that young people had been unemployed and had to be brought back into the formal labour market. Shaping people assumed to be unaccustomed to work (or even collective life) into responsible workers was thus a key element of NGO management, as one supervisor with a business background explained:

> Yes, reinsertion. Behaviour in work, having a timetable again, learning how to respect a hierarchy, not one of domination but a good one, organization I mean, where there's a boss, employees, subalterns, teamwork, like how any business works. We achieve this with some, it's more difficult with others but this is the objective, the goal.

Attempts to mould this human material were thus a regular feature of working life at the cooperative, reminiscent of E.P Thompson's (1967) work on attempts to adapt workers' consciousness and timekeeping habits to industrial capitalism. Yet were my workmates, like Thompson's incipient English working-class, unaccustomed to the factory floor? From conversations and interviews with young workers in the cooperative, a different picture emerged. It was not that *los pibes* had generally lacked work – in fact, they had extensively experienced it. Responses to my question of what jobs they had done were typically: 'Phew, loads, where to start?'. Vero, skinny and with an impressive, rather unexpected Spiderman tattoo on her upper left arm, had worked

in telemarketing, sales, and catering. Pablo, whose missing teeth gave him a useful hard-man appearance that belied his tenderness, had worked in deliveries, a private recycling warehouse, a pallet factory, and a restaurant. Pilar, a young single mother, had been a child-minder, leafleteer, fruit shop worker, and telesales assistant. The picture that emerged was one of many short-term jobs from which my workmates had been fired, or had left due to a combination of factors ranging from low pay and unsuitable working hours, to boredom and the need for a change. And where parents had become unemployed (such as with David's father, a railway worker who had lost a limb), this often drove their children into employment at a younger age, so as to help put food on the table at home.

This was not then a group with no experience working, but rather one which had become habituated to temporary, short-term work. Such work is identified with the change from Fordist and Keynesian capitalism to neoliberalism, with the loss of permanent, stable jobs usually understood to benefit capital at the expense of labour (Brenner *et al*. 2010). Yet whatever the structural factors that caused secure, permanent jobs to be exceptional for many Argentine youngsters, it is wrong to assume that all jump at the chance of a longer-term job, regardless of pay and conditions. The cooperative had experienced a huge turnover of workers and *pibes* in particular, with Clara telling me that up to 200 people had passed through. If the NGO had difficulty retaining its young workforce, it also had problems of productivity. Appeals were constantly made on the basis that if workers were more productive, they would earn more money, since they received income from sales. But such a line of argument would only work if income was the principal motivation for coming to work (see Fernández Álvarez 2006 for a discussion of non-financial motivations for cooperativists).

The working rhythms of waste-pickers at Rio de Janeiro's Jardim Gramacho landfill have been discussed by Kathleen Millar (2015, 2018), particularly in relation to Thompson's writing on the relation between temporality and labour. Like the waste managers in Morón who were surprised by their high staff turnover given their offer of steady work, Millar was puzzled by the cases she encountered of workers giving up coveted formal sector jobs in order to return to the dump, and linked this to the autonomy and control of lived time afforded by landfill labour. The NuevaMente case is rather different since, as I have described, workers there were principally vulnerable youth, not *cartoneros* with experience or the possibility of seeking out work at a landfill. Yet, for all their differences we also find similarities, in the sense that workers in both cases do not necessarily prize permanence or stability, do seek control over the rhythms of their own working day, and can become 'restless' working in a single job for long periods of time.

For Pilar, the cooperative principally functioned as a space of temporary respite and shelter from the stormy weather of family troubles. This respite can be put at risk by productivist pressures, leading members to seek another place of refuge. Encapsulated in the expression I heard several times in the cooperative – 'If I don't like it, I'm off' – is the idea that financial dependence on the cooperative did not prevail. This attitude was not restricted to younger members, with Karina, a 36-year old mother of four also telling me that she would happily leave the cooperative if she didn't like it: 'I'm never

dependent on a job. If things aren't going well, then I'll look for another one, I won't stay put'. As Karina told me, even if she was fired as a consequence, she would rather stay at home and look after a sick child than leave them at home and come in to work. In a flexible labour market where well-paid permanent jobs with social security benefits – the kind that Perón had institutionalised – were few and far between, young workers did not fear walking away from a job that they didn't like and looking for another. Rather than a sign of individualisation, however, walking out can, as in Woodcock's ethnography of call-centres, be seen as a 'form of unorganised resistance – and one that is not that different from striking' (2017: 109).

This indicates that perhaps 'recovery' was neither the best nor the only, way of understanding changes in these workers' subjectivities. Like Thompson's proletariat, though for different reasons, these were not human beings who could easily be stretched into a disciplined industrial worker. Recovery, as the reshaping of bodies and minds into the productive and cared for Peronist worker, was not a project that young workers could easily sympathise with, nor did they conceive of themselves as waste, or their previous work experience prior to the cooperative as a waste of their time or productivity. As we shall observe in the following section, young workers used different metaphors to structure their life experiences and relation to the recycling cooperative, but such accounts were sometimes marginalised or occluded by hierarchies of knowledge that privileged municipal and NGO accounts.

From Recovery to Respite

In the ethnographic examples given above, 'recovery' has many different significations. In some instances, human and non-humans literally undergo a process of recovery in a mutual transformation where things are recovered from the waste stream by people whose therapeutic labour helps them escape the confines of addiction. At the same time, however, the register of recovery had become so pervasive that municipal and NGO officials cast a need for recovery onto a varied socio-material landscape that proved resistant. The piles of hosepipe, mass of polystyrene and bales of foil which accumulated at the cooperative represented a silent protest, a challenge to recoverability and recyclability. This was not even a case of degraded materials revealing the limits of eternal return and the circular economy (Graeber 2012). Rather, some things made it off the conveyer belt and out of waste stream only to remain stationary or slowly atrophy.

Alongside this silent protest, workers spoke with greater volume. In recounting their labour histories, workplace motivations, and complicated personal lives, the *pibes* of *NuevaMente* challenged their categorisation as waste being recovered into the formal economy. This hints at the shift between the literal and metaphorical use of the concepts of 'recovery'. More specifically, we are at times dealing with what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call a 'structural metaphor' that 'involves the structuring of one kind of experience or activity in terms of another kind of experience or activity' (1980: 197). In this case, one experience is structured in terms of several others, in that people are imagined as undergoing a recovery *like* that from illness, and *like* that undergone by things

removed from the waste stream. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's conceptualisation and Gille's waste regime concept, we can describe this as an instance of synecdoche, where part of the workforce and waste-stream capable of recovery came to stand for the whole.

NGO and municipal officials shifted between literal and metaphorical assertions that young people were recovering within the cooperative. This was an understanding with which some of these workers agreed but others disputed whilst putting forward an alternative account of the relation between labour and subjectivity. Rather than dismissing metaphor, I suggest a better way of taking informants seriously is to chart the movement *between* the literal and metaphorical employment of these concepts. Identifying the metaphorical use of 'recovery' as applied to persons is not to dismiss the material force of such an imaginary or its capacity to contribute to the emergence of a physical infrastructure and frame subjectivities. It is, however, to admit the limits and (in)appropriateness of these metaphors and recognise the divergent subjectivities that appear at their margins.

Instead of enabling a recovery that placed the worker on the first step of a ladder to formal employment or on the road to better health, the cooperative often functioned for many as a place where they could temporarily *despejar la cabeza* ('clear their minds'). Pilar even cited this, above wages, as the principal reason for coming in to work at the cooperative:

> I'm here more because of the connections I've made than because of how much they pay me. Yes, I'm here because I want to be, because it's also a way of clearing my mind. Like escaping reality. Maybe you're struggling at home and you come here and it clears your mind … you start joking, you forget, you forget … the problems are still there because you know that when you come out of here at 8 at night … sometimes I don't want to go, because I know the problems are at home, waiting for me.

Like Pilar, Karine also worked mornings in the state work scheme *Argentina Trabaja* (Argentina Works) and said that she enjoyed her shifts in NuevaMente, where she was *tranquila* (calm, tranquil) and where work was like a *cable a tierra* (lit. 'an earth wire', something that keeps you grounded). When I asked her what she meant, she said that this was when you 'use a job to clear your mind of the problems you have in your house or with your kids'. David also spoke of going out with friends from the cooperative to clear his mind, telling me of how he sometimes arrived home and had an *ataque de nervios* (panic attack). When I said that others in the cooperative had spoken of work as a way for them to 'clear the mind', he responded that this was 'what he was getting at': 'I come here, I'm with the *pibe*s, I mess around, I work as well … But I don't know, I get home and it's like I switch off'. María, who had been in the cooperative almost since the beginning, told me that the workplace served a similar function for her:

> I feel good here. Because there are days at home where I feel so depressed, so down. I start to think about my economic situation, problems with my kids. I come here and it's like I clear my mind.

A single mother with four daughters, keeping them on the straight and narrow was challenging; her oldest daughter had become slightly wayward and wouldn't go to school. In time, I met all her daughters as they came to the cooperative to wait for their mother, serving her *mate*[16] as she finished the day's tasks. The difficulties that she had with the health of one disabled daughter, *La Beba*, during my time at the cooperative, indicated the matrix of poor health, poverty and institutional discrimination that haunted the precarious, private lives of my informants and from which complete recovery was elusive.

Conclusion

At the NuevaMente cooperative in Morón, I found environmental activists and municipal officials joining other regional actors in emphasising the recoverability of persons and things. In this article, I have attempted to explain this circumstance by tracing the emergence of a register of recovery that is contingent on multiple, convergent crises in Argentina. In my fieldsite, the concept of recovery took on a vernacular form that saw it polysemously applied to such varied domains as contaminated public space, waste matter, political integrity, workers, and the economic sphere.

Workers could be relatively certain about the nature of the material that they encountered on the conveyer belt but the hope that everything might one day be recycled still meant the on-site accumulation of materials. Effectively, such material was recovered from the waste-stream but placed in limbo, unable to be recycled. Just as the piles of hose pipe and polystyrene stacked at *NuevaMente* attested to the limits of recycling, the divergent temporalities and precarious lives of the *pibes* exposed the limits of recovery as a metaphor applied to their role in the cooperative. Young workers were attuned to both a different functionality and temporality of labour, having become accustomed to short-term employment that they could easily walk away from. Temporal displacement thus emerges as a key rhetorical strategy by which workers and materials are 'unknown' in the present by being presented as waste in the past, and ultimately recoverable in the future. All this suggests that a more nuanced critique is required of the practice of representing people as discarded or trash-like (e.g. Bauman 2003). By representing political predecessors as wasteful, a burdensome expectation of recovery is placed on the shoulders and subjectivities of workers whose life experiences jar against binary narratives of exclusion and inclusion, wastage and recovery. Through their embodied and sensory knowledge of the materiality of waste and *material*, workers also exposed rhetorical and discursive attempts to disappear waste into a neoliberal past.

The importance placed on the recoverability of persons and things in Morón formed part of a particular narrative where pretenders to a post-neoliberal Argentine politics – including Sabbatella and Cristina but also Peronist waste managers – contrasted themselves with a neoliberal epoch. Since then, many things have changed. The election of affluent businessman Mauricio Macri as national President in 2015 and the return of Cristina as vice-president to Peronist Alberto Fernández in 2019 made international headlines. Morón's political landscape has closely followed the national trend, with a

centre-right candidate elected alongside Macri in 2015 and Sabbatella's party returning to power in 2019. Waste, recycling and recovery have continued to play highly symbolic roles, with the NuevaMente building burnt to the ground on the night of the 2015 election and a recycling point set alight soon after Lucas Ghi's return as mayor in 2019. Unsubstantiated accusations arose that the 2015 fire was used as cover for the destruction of thousands of documents from the outgoing post-neoliberal government. A much more likely scenario is that the piles of unsold, flammable material and precarious infrastructure led to the fire, 'biting back' against a waste regime that emphasised their eventual recoverability. The fire led to the relocation of NuevaMente to a smaller site and the dispersal of the workforce across a series of 'puntos verdes' (green points). In 2019, three men were caught on camera setting fire to one of these points, and were suspected of targeting it because of its proximity to the 'memory house', the majestic residence built by neoliberal mayor Rousselot, and transformed by Sabbetella into a human right museum. The cyclical nature of Argentine politics continues, and waste and recovery remain an excellent material and metaphorical prism through which to understand its ebbs and flows.

Notes

1. *NuevaMente* has a double meaning of 'New Mind' and 'Again'.
2. Such as the Excluded Workers Movement (MTE) in Argentina (see: http://periodismohumano.com/economia/reciclando-vidas-a-traves-de-la-basura.html).
3. (http://municipiog.montevideo.gub.uy/comunicacion/noticias/reciclando-vidas).
4. (OED Online 2016).
5. (OED Online 2016).
6. Unfinished by the time fieldwork was over.
7. Autoridad de Cuenca Matanza Riachuelo.
8. http://www.acumar.gov.ar/institucional/27/mision.
9. Gestión Integral de Residuos Sólidos Urbános (GIRSU).
10. (OED Online 2015). This was also, incidentally, point 8 of the political program of the Communist Manifesto.
11. Peronism is the defining feature of Argentine politics, which refers back to the government of General Juan Domingo Perón from 1946-1952. This is seen as a golden period of Argentine history which lay the foundations for a host of rights for the working-class. Peronism is a diverse and complex political movement which contains its own right and left-wing factions or as my informant Gustavo Escudero put it, 'Peronism contains its own opposition'.
12. Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC).
13. High Impact Polystyrene.
14. Young guy or girl (dude etc.), often used in an affectionate way by and for youngsters from the popular classes in Argentina.
15. Ironically, neoliberal President Menem, who was responsible for rising unemployment, the degradation of workers'rights, privatisation, and Argentina's economic crisis in theory came from this Peronist tradition, but he has been completely cut out of the Peronist picture by all but the most right-wing militants. In the Peronist Matryoshka doll set that I spotted in Gustavo's office, and which he subsequently gifted me, there was a clean jump from president Alfonsín (1983–89) to Nestor Kirchner (2003–2007).
16. Argentine/ Uruguayan bitter green tea.

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